

Calgary

Alberta Health Services explores legal options after hundreds attend rodeo

Rodeo was billed as an anti-lockdown event in a province with more than 22,000 active COVID-19 cases

[Sarah Rieger](#) · CBC News · Posted: May 02, 2021 7:33 PM MT | Last Updated: May 3, 2021



Hundreds attended a rodeo near Bowden, Alta., on May 1 and 2 in defiance of public health restrictions and despite surging COVID-19 cases. (Justin Pennell/CBC)

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Alberta Health Services says it is exploring its legal options after hundreds attended a rodeo in central Alberta — held to protest COVID-19 restrictions. But some have questioned how the event was allowed to proceed in the first place.

Over the weekend as Alberta reported thousands of new COVID-19 cases, reaching dire numbers not seen earlier in the pandemic, hundreds attended a rodeo in an empty lot along Highway 2A, near Bowden, about 30 kilometres south of Red Deer.

The rodeo was billed as an anti-lockdown event, despite the fact Alberta has not experienced a strict lockdown during the pandemic. In-store retail is permitted, while dine-in service is closed restaurant patios remain open and outdoor gatherings are allowed for groups numbering less than 10.

Alberta's hospital system is bracing for a massive surge of patients and some regions have scaled back surgeries to prepare.

The province currently has the highest active case rate in either Canada or the U.S., and the current active COVID-19 case total stands at 22,920, its highest ever.

“I think that there is a bit of a sense of frustration on the part of health-care workers who are seeing large gatherings of crowds that are not being broken up.”

- Dr. Stephanie Smith, infectious disease physician

An AHS spokesperson said prior to the event, inspectors notified rodeo organizers in writing that the event would break public health restrictions if it proceeded, and that AHS was considering its legal options.

"It is disappointing that the organizers ignored this information and went ahead with their event, knowing it was a clear breach of the current public health restrictions," AHS said in an emailed statement.

"In addition, it is extremely concerning that people would knowingly put their fellow Albertans at risk by ignoring the restrictions, particularly with increasing cases and the subsequent pressure on our healthcare system."

An RCMP spokesperson said they were not aware of any charges laid in connection with the event on Sunday.

WATCH / Hundreds defy Alberta COVID-19 restrictions to attend rodeo:



Hundreds in Alberta defy public health orders as COVID-19 cases surge

1 year ago | 3:22

Despite restrictions on gatherings in Alberta, hundreds defied the rules at protests and even a rodeo. Meanwhile, Premier Jason Kenney faces calls to take more action as he suspended the provincial legislature.

Premier Jason Kenney, who has been criticized for waiting too long to bring in new restrictions and failing to enforce those rules that are in place, scolded rodeo goers on Twitter on Sunday afternoon.

"On a personal note, I'm angered and saddened to see so many people selfishly put themselves ahead of others. Rodeo celebrates Alberta's Western heritage, a key part of which is our community spirit and looking out for others, especially the vulnerable," Kenney said.

"That's the opposite of what these folks are doing."

Kenney blamed Albertans who are ignoring the restrictions for the current state in which the province finds itself.

Consistent messaging needed, doctor says

Attendees at the event told CBC News they believe the pandemic is a "scamdemic" and that COVID-19 is a "flu" that is not serious. Despite pandemic restrictions, more than 2,000 Albertans have died of COVID-19 while around 30-50 Albertans die each year of the flu.

Dr. Stephanie Smith, an infectious diseases physician at the University of Alberta Hospital, said she would not describe the restrictions in place as particularly restrictive.

"I think that there is a bit of a sense of frustration on the part of health-care workers who are seeing large gatherings of crowds that are not being broken up ... they're going to need hospital care and ICU care and it's just going to stress the system more."

WATCH | Robb Stuart, the mayor of Bowden, Alta., tells David Common on Power & Politics that those who flouted health restrictions at a rodeo outside his town should be held accountable.



'This thing was so above and beyond what was expected'

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Robb Stuart, the mayor of Bowden, Alta., tells David Common on Power & Politics that those who flouted health restrictions at a rodeo outside his town should be held accountable.

Smith said she believes if there had been more consistent messaging from the government on how restrictions work, the rules might have been adhered to more rigorously.

Kenney dismissed bringing in new restrictions on Monday, saying people likely wouldn't follow them anyway, but by Thursday introduced new rules on so-called COVID-19 hot spots. He said the measures were critical to bending the curve.

"Until we actually get a much larger proportion of the population vaccinated, then we really do need the restrictions. So I think part of the ... lack of adherence may just be a sense that there's mixed messaging," Smith said.

The rodeo had been advertised since March. It took place on private land after the town's agricultural society revoked its permit.

Opposition Leader Rachel Notley said the government had plenty of time to act to prevent a potentially dangerous event from happening.

"We had good notice that it was happening and nobody did anything about it," she said.



The rodeo was held on private land because the town's agricultural society revoked its permit following discussions with Alberta Health Services. (Justin Pennell/CBC)

The rodeo wasn't the only large event in Alberta breaking public health mandates this weekend.

Street Church Ministries has continued to breach public health orders by holding large services and protests. AHS said church leader Artur Pawlowski has continued to deny inspectors access to his building, instead using abusive language, bullying and directing racist slurs at AHS staff.

AHS has obtained an order for entry to the church's location; it said legal steps, like that order, take time to process through the court system.



Protesters against public health restrictions gathered at several locations around Calgary over the weekend, including briefly disrupting traffic on 17th Avenue S.W. on Saturday. (Submitted)

The organizers behind this weekend's rodeo say they plan to hold another event on Canada Day.

With files from Erin Collins and the Canadian Press

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